

Sunday School Series: "Ask the Pastor"

I. Fasting

A. Fasting in the Old Covenant

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| 1. Leviticus
16:29, 31 | 9. Psalm 35:13 | 18. Daniel 9:3 |
| 2. Judges 20:26 | 10. Psalm 69:10 | 19. Joel 1:14 |
| 3. 1 Samuel 7:6 | 11. Psalm 109:24 | 20. Joel 2:14ff. |
| 4. 1 Samuel 31:10 | 12. Ezra 8:21-23 | 21. Jonah 3:5 |
| 5. 2 Samuel 1:12 | 13. Nehemiah
1:4ff. | 22. Zechariah
7:5ff. |
| 6. 2 Samuel 2:23 | 14. Nehemiah 9:1 | 23. Zechariah
8:19ff. |
| 7. 2 Chronicles
20:3 | 15. Isaiah 58:3ff. | |
| 8. Esther 4:3,16 | 16. Jeremiah 36:6 | |
| | 17. Daniel 6:18 | |

- a) Fasting in the Old Testament is tied to seasons of prayer and worship, is commonly found in the context of repentance in light of the impending or presently experienced judgment of God, and is connected with the revelation of the Kingdom of God and its hoped for (and, by faith, enjoyed) salvation.
- b) Properly practiced, it is always a heartfelt
 - (1) humbling of oneself before God,
 - (2) testimony to one's being set apart from the world,
 - (3) and to our seeking first God's Kingdom, righteousness, and salvation,
 - (4) a sincere profession that forsaking this world and even one's life in this world is preferable to gaining the whole world and losing one's soul,
 - (5) an aid to prayer inasmuch as for a season the body itself is brought into subjection of God as even the needful things are set aside,
 - (6) a genuine recognition of a deservance of judgment and
 - (7) a truly repentant, humble cry to the Lord for mercy
- c) Fasting that does not conform to the above criteria is an abomination unto the Lord and is condemned by Him as worthless idolatry.

d) Fasting in the Old Testament is anticipatory in nature, having a view to the coming mercy or judgment of God.

B. The New Covenant

1. Luke 2:37

2. Matthew 4:2

3. Matthew 6:16-18

4. Matthew 9:15b (9:14ff.)

5. Matthew 18:12

6. Acts 13:2-3

7. Acts 14:23

8. 1 Corinthians 7:5

9. 1 Corinthians 9:27

- a) The redemptive historical context determines its practice.
- b) “The importance of his words on fasting is that he wants the formal service of God, and the manner of the worship of God in general, to be viewed in the light of the historical situation of salvation and that he makes this worship dependent on the latter.”
- c) “At the present time, it is the stage of fulfillment, of the presence of the Bridegroom, of the passing of the old and the coming of the new which must dominate everything, even the manner of worship.”
- d) “This is why maintaining what is old (fasting as an expression of sorrow and repentance with a view to the approaching judgment, the subject of John the Baptist’s exhortation) means a misunderstanding and ignoring of the time of salvation that has already begun, as well as the proclamation of salvation that is being fulfilled.” cp. Zech. 8:19
- e) “it is not the law that is opposed by Jesus nor the observance of certain religious forms attendant to it, but rather, the basically unbelieving mechanical maintenance of what is old without recognizing what is new.” cp. Isa. 58:3ff.
- f) “Jesus’ presence changes the nature and manner of fasting, forever. You see, it would be improper for the church to pour dust and ashes on their heads, or smear ashes on their forehead, or refrain from washing. For you see these things speak of sorrow, of judgment tied to the coming of the judgment of God.
- g) When Jesus then tells us to fast with heads anointed and faces washed He is in effect saying that our status before the Lord has changed. We cannot fast as those under condemnation. We cannot fast as those who are unclean, or as those who anticipate

either mercy or judgment. Our fasting must be in accordance with the reality that we have already been blessed with Heaven's blessing in Christ, that not judgment but mercy in the now dawned Kingdom of God is given sinners.

- h) "Rather than gloom and disfigurement, rending garments, sitting on ash heaps, pouring dust on our heads, our fasting is both an expression of sorrow and joy, repentance and forgiveness, the absence of God and His very real presence with us. In other words, we fast as those who are anointed, blessed with the blessing of God, as those who are washed, clean from the guilt and stain and condemnation of sin. Our fasting must participate in the life of the now dawned Kingdom of Heaven in Jesus Christ. Even in our sorrow then, joy and gladness. Even in our want, fullness and abundance. Even in our repentance, confidence and boldness in Christ. We cannot walk around like the hypocrites, gloomy and despairing, unsightly and disfigured. We are the children of the Father, and we belong to His Kingdom! How can we act as if we are under His judgment when in fact He has called us into His blessing?"

C. Our Standards

1. WCF XXI:5 5. The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear, the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence, singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ, are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: beside religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner.
2. WLC Q. 108. What are the duties required in the second commandment A. The duties required in the second commandment are, the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath instituted in his word; particularly prayer and thanksgiving in the name of Christ; the reading, preaching, and hearing of the word; the administration and receiving of the sacraments; church government and discipline; the

ministry and maintenance thereof; religious fasting; swearing by the name of God, and vowing unto him: as also the disapproving, detesting, opposing, all false worship; and, according to each one's place and calling, removing it, and all monuments of idolatry.

3. DPW - CHAPTER V, Special Occasions of Public Worship

Under the gospel, we are commanded to keep no other particular day holy, except the Lord's Day. Nevertheless, God's people may observe special occasions as the dispensations of God's providence administer cause and opportunity. Such observance is both consonant with Scripture and pastorally appropriate.

a) A. Prayer and Fasting

- (1) When great and notable calamities come upon or threaten the church, community, or nation, when judgment is deserved because of sin, when the people seek some special blessing from the Lord, or when a pastor is to be ordained or installed (Form of Government, Chapter XXIII, Section 7), it is fitting that the people of God engage in times of solemn prayer and fasting.
- (2) Prayer and fasting may be observed by private individuals and families at their discretion or by the Church at the discretion of the appropriate judicatory. If the civil authority calls for a time of prayer and fasting that the judicatories of the Church deem to be in harmony with the Scriptures, they should consider issuing such a call to their members.
- (3) Public notice is to be given before the time of prayer and fasting comes, to enable persons to order their temporal affairs so that they can participate.
- (4) It is especially appropriate on days of prayer and fasting called by the Church that the people of God gather for a time of prayer, the singing of psalms and hymns, and the reading and preaching of the Word of God. Let them lament their distress or unworthiness before the Lord, confess their sins, humbly implore the Lord for deliverance from the judgment present or imminent or for the blessing sought, and commit themselves anew to the faithful service of the Lord their God. It is fitting on such days that God's people abstain from food and from

such activities as may distract from their solemn engagement in prayer.

D. Reformed Tradition

1. Calvin (Institutes IV:12:15): “A holy and lawful fast has three ends in view. We use it either to mortify and subdue the flesh, that it may not wanton, or to prepare the better for prayer and holy meditation; or to give evidence of humbling ourselves before God, when we would confess our guilt before him.”
2. Second Helvetic Confession XXIV
 - a) Now, the more seriously the Church of Christ condemns surfeiting, drunkenness, and all kinds of lust and intemperance, so much the more strongly does it commend to us Christian fasting. For fasting is nothing else than the abstinence and moderation of the godly, and a discipline, care and chastisement of our flesh undertaken as a necessity for the time being, whereby we are humbled before God, and we deprive the flesh of its fuel so that it may the more willingly and easily obey the Spirit. Therefore, those who pay no attention to such things do not fast, but imagine that they fast if they stuff their stomachs once day, and at a certain or prescribed time abstain from certain foods, thinking that by having done this work they please God and do something good. Fasting is an aid to the prayers of the saints and for all virtues. But as is seen in the books of the prophets, the fast of the Jews who fasted from food but not from wickedness did not please God.
 - b) **PUBLIC AND PRIVATE FASTING.** Now there is a public and a private fasting. In olden times they celebrated public fasts in calamitous times and in the affliction of the Church. They abstained altogether from food till the evening, and spent all that time in holy prayers, the worship Of God, and repentance These differed little from mourning, and there is frequent mention of them in the Prophets and especially by Joel in Ch. 2. Such a fast should be kept at this day, when the Church is in distress. private fasts are undertaken by each one of us, as he feels himself withdrawn from the Spirit. For in this manner he withdraws the flesh from its fuel.

- c) **CHARACTERISTICS OF FASTING.** All fasts ought to proceed from a free and willing spirit, and from genuine humility, and not feigned to gain the applause or favor of men, much less that a man should wish to merit righteousness by them. But let every one fast to this end, that he may deprive the flesh of its fuel in order that he may the more zealously serve God.
- d) **LENT.** The fast of Lent is attested by antiquity but not at all in the writings of the apostles. Therefore it ought not, and cannot, be imposed on the faithful. It is certain that formerly there were various forms and customs of fasting. hence, Irenaeus, a most ancient writer, says: "Some think that a fast should be observed one day only, others two days, but others more, and some forty days. This diversity in keeping this fast did not first begin in our times, but long before us by those, as I suppose, who did not simply keep to what had been delivered to them from the beginning, but afterwards fell into another custom either through negligence or ignorance" (Fragm. 3, ed. Stieren, I. 824 f.). Moreover, Socrates, the historian, says: "Because no ancient text is found concerning this matter, I think the apostles left this to every man's own judgment, that every one might do what is good without fear or constraint" (Hist. ecclesiast. V.22, 40).
- e) **CHOICE OF FOOD.** Now concerning the choice of foods, we think that in fasting all things should be denied to the flesh whereby the flesh is made more insolent, and by which it is greatly pleased, and by which it is inflamed with desire whether by fish or meat or spices or delicacies and excellent wines. Moreover, we know that all the creatures of God were made for the use and service of men. All things which God made are good, and without distinction are to be used in the fear of God and with proper moderation (Gen. 2:15 f.). For the apostle says: "To the pure all things are pure" (Titus 1:15), and also: "Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience" (I Cor. 10:25). The same apostle calls the doctrine of those who teach to abstain from meats "the doctrine of demons"; for "God created foods to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know this truth that

everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving" (I Tim. 4:1 ff.) The same apostle, in the epistle to the Colossians, reproves those who want to acquire a reputation for holiness by excessive abstinence (Col. 2:18 ff.).